

Van Morrison Born To Sing: No Plan B

by Peter Stone Brown

For Van Morrison, first and foremost, it's always been about the music, and finding that magic place inside the music that takes you someplace else, outside yourself to the nameless realm beyond. What many see as an aloof taciturn stage presence that at times seems more eccentric the older he gets has always been about him shutting everything else out in search of the indefinable mystic.

Born To Sing: No Plan B, his first studio album in four years, finds him occupying familiar territory with jazz influenced soul and R&B, but the emphasis is on jazz grooves and those grooves and what the excellent crew of musicians he's gathered for these sessions are doing. Reportedly recorded in Belfast (no studio credit is given in the notes), the sound on the record is brilliant, making you feel at times you are right in the room with the musicians. Each instrument is loud and clear, its clarity defined. Nothing is buried in the mix. Listen on headphones and you can swear you can hear the sax players, one of which is Morrison breathing.

The grooves are relaxed, yet soulful and usually swinging. The album is filled with simply gorgeous sax solos, many played by Morrison on alto sax, while Chris White plays tenor and clarinet on the title track. The horns, including for the first time on a Morrison album, a trombone played by Alistair White dominate the sound, but Paul Moran's organ and piano, Dave Keary's guitar, and the rhythm section of Paul Moore on bass and drummer Jeff Lardner are all equally important in maintaining a tasteful and soulful groove. Morrison, no slouch as a player himself, also plays guitar and piano. As a band leader, he knows exactly what he wants and he not only gets it, but nails it.

The album starts in a familiar organ based soul groove with "Open The Door To Your Heart" with Morrison on piano and casually introduces what proves to be the lyrical theme of this album, money. Morrison continues on piano on the somewhat jazzier next track, "Goin' Down To Monte Carlo," and the lyrics start to get a bit more intense on the first line second verse: "Sartre said that hell is other people, I believe that most of them are." Then later following an exceptional bass solo, comes the lines: "Playing in the background, some kind of phony pseudo jazz/I don't care, I'm trying to get away from people that are trying to drive me mad." The feel of the track is so relaxed that the lyrics stand out in contrast.

Then it's back to soul somewhere between Sam Cooke and '50s R&B for "Born To Sing." Like many Morrison songs, the melody is familiar, but can't be pinned down to any one tune. It's simply a song about the joys of singing:

*When it gets to the part
When the band starts to swing
Then you know everything
'Cause you were born to sing*

Lyrical things get a bit more serious on the jazz ballad, "End Of The Rainbow," where it becomes clear this is not an album about searching for "William Blake and the eternal," or celebrating the joys of Sidney Bechet, with the opening lines: "No pot of gold at the end of the rainbow/No social ladder to climb around here," and then at the beginning of the third verse: "So much for capitalism, so much for materialism/Every penny now has got to be earned." In a recent interview in the *Belfast Telegraph*, Morrison refusing to take any sides said he was merely observing, and the vocal on the song reflects that.

From there the album moves right into pure swing on "Close Enough For Jazz," which is primarily an instrumental with vocals coming in at the end, then it's back to R&B for two fairly typical late Morrison songs, "Mystic Of The East" and "Retreat And View" where the music, particularly the use of steel guitar on the second song is more interesting than the lyrics.

Then it's back to jazz with a slight funk edge for what is vocally a chant, "If In Money We Trust," which appears to be a rant about money taking the place of god with verses like:

*When God is dead
And money's not enough
In what do you trust
When it's not enough?*

This leads into a musical change of pace on what is clearly a John Lee Hooker inspired blues on "Pagan Heart," with Morrison playing impressive Hooker style guitar. Hooker is one of Morrison's chief inspirations. The entire band, horns included maintains a steady groove throughout on a song that is quite possibly about Robert Johnson going to the crossroads to make a deal with the devil.

On the final track "Educating Archie," the band returns to jazz flavored R&B, though the lyrics are unlike any previous R&B tune,

opening with: "You're a slave to the capitalist system/Which is ruled by the global elite, and then on the third verse:

*You're controlled by the media
Everything you say and do
What happened to the individual
Tell me what happened to you*

Again the melody is familiar, in fact reminiscent of "Bring It On Home To Me," and this time Morrison doesn't sound like the detached observer. There's a touch of anger in his voice similar to his late early song, "The Great Deception" or the way he sneered "Got your pen and notebook ready" on "Saint Dominic's Preview."

While this album is hardly a call to arms in the manner of say Bruce Springsteen's *Wrecking Ball*, and while it's not unprecedented for Morrison to take on topical concerns, for it to be the dominant theme of one his albums, says something about the current state of the world. Whether or not these songs will stand among his best is debatable. My guess is probably not. But the playing is so good, the feel of the music so enticing and the singing as usual, excellent, that it's hard not to listen to it. As another songwriter once said, "And that's good enough for now." And there's no mistaking it, *Born To Sing: No Plan B* is definitely about now.